

VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE
of the
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Veterans & Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislative Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on **Tuesday, January 20, 2004.**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Daniel P. Losquadro - Chairman
Lynne C. Nowick - Vice-Chairman
Leg. Jon Cooper
Leg. Andrew A. Crecca
Leg. William J. Lindsay
Leg. Cameron Alden

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Mea Knapp, Counsel to the Legislature
Ilona Julius, Deputy Clerk
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Office of the Aging
Bob Smith, Director of Veterans Affairs
Nanette Essel, PO Aide
Joe Muncey, Budget Review Office

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Kraus - Court Stenographer

(THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 12:40 PM)

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

I call this meeting to order. We'll start with the pledge of allegiance led by Legislator Nowick.

(SALUTATION)

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Legislator Lindsay?

LEG. LINDSAY:

May I be recognized for point of personal privilege?

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Yes.

LEG. LINDSAY:

As the outgoing Chairman of Veterans and Seniors, I just want to put it on the record that I wish you luck and I hope you hold up under the strain of the tremendous agenda that this Committee has.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Thank you, Legislator Lindsay. And I would just like to say also on a point of personal privilege that it is a great honor to be given the chairmanship of this Committee. I know even though the agenda can be diminutive at times, it's a very important Committee and we do very good work. And I'm very excited to be a part of it this year. I look forward to a very productive year for this Committee.

I do not see any yellow cards. If anyone from the Office of the Aging has anything to add to address this Committee, I'd appreciate it.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hi. I just want to wish everybody Happy New year. I know with the cold weather probably one of the things everybody wants to know about is the Heat Program. And in our office I asked this morning what we're up to. And up to December -- at the end of December we were up over 1,000 applications more than we were last year. We had received 2677 apps as opposed to 1567 last year. And through March of '03 we had done a total of 3,835. We're up to 4,350 as of January 16 so the Heat Program is definitely moving along. Applications are taking longer to process because there's just so many of them. Just so you know, it is going. The federal -- the money still is coming in. I don't know when they'll cut off. It's out there because we never know when they cut off. They usually don't give us much notice on that but I just figured you

might want to know that people are definitely taking advantage of the program.

LEG. LINDSAY:

What causes the program to be cut off? Does it reach a maximum funding level?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I believe it's the lack of funds. When they run out, they run out. So, you know, we process the applications as fast as we can. My understanding is, though, if we have the applications in, that's taken into consideration as to when they -- you know, when we end the program. They don't cut off just because the check hasn't been cut. It's based on the applications being in to be processed.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Seeing as we had a particularly cold winter last year also, just as a reference point, was the program cut off for lack of funding last year?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

My understanding last year is that the program went until -- we still had applications coming in in July, so we were fine last year. I don't know if it's the particular cold, maybe because we had it earlier or it's the fact people are more aware of it because they has been a lot of publicity on the program. But we are definitely receiving a tremendous number of applications. So if you have constituents who are looking for information on it, if they're over 60, you know, tell them to call our office. Otherwise they would be referred to HEAP Central, which is through DSS. So I just wanted to give you a little update on that.

Does anybody have questions for me on anything else with our office?

LEG. NOWICK:

Did we ever get the vans we were talking about last year? Were they vans we were --

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

The center aisle buses.

LEG. NOWICK:

The buses? The center aisle --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

It was approved. And now we have to do the capital project. You know, we have to get the -- full leg approved the money as part of the capital budget.

LEG. NOWICK:

What's the time frame?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

We don't receive funding for that. That's all County funds. So now we have to purchase them.

LEG. NOWICK:

And what's the time frame on that?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Oh, it takes forever. It really does. It'll take us probably -- it really does. It depends on if it's on bid -- if it's on bid, then we do the purchase order. By the time we get it and then get the registration, the contracts, it could be six months down the road.

LEG. NOWICK:

Six months? Not next year? Six months, you think?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

If we had it by the summer, I'd be thrilled.

LEG. NOWICK:

Okay.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

It's just a long process, the purchase. And then if we have to make anything accessible, that's more time. But we're excited that they were approved, so that was good news for to us.

LEG. ALDEN:

Mr. Chairman? Holly, these are the ones that we supply to the Towns?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Correct. They're the ones for nutrition programs.

LEG. ALDEN:

Okay. Now, there was a little bit of a question as far as how the lettering should be done on those. Has that been resolved?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Generally the lettering on the vehicles, if they're County funds, we just say funded by the County of Suffolk.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

I believe the question was that some of the Towns on -- no place on these buses or vans did they say that they were funded by the County of Suffolk.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

We give them decals. And when we find out they don't have them, we give them more decals. I mean we do check on that when we go out to look at the vehicles. Because you're right. Sometimes they manage to just not --

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Could we stripe these vehicles or apply these decals prior to delivery?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I'll check with DPW and see if that's possible because we usually - it's usually a decal that's been put on -- for example, when we do vehicles with state funds or with federal funds, then it will say something different, you know. But on this one, I'll check with DPW on that.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Maybe put a little tag under it like a mattress tag, do not remove under penalty of law.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I'm still trying to find out what happens if you do that. But what the heck? I'll double check on that.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

I appreciate it. Is there anything else to add?

LEG. CRECCA:

Before Bob speaks, I just want to withdraw my prior statements. Bob, do you live in my district?

MR. SMITH:

I get all your mailings.

LEG. CRECCA:

That doesn't mean anything.

MR. SMITH:

I do.

Thank you for having me here. My name is Bob Smith. And effective today I am the Director of the Veterans Service Agency for Suffolk County. The County Executive, Steve Levy, has asked me to take on that position.

Many of you know I was in this position for five years prior. And I am the best choice for the job. There's no one better in the County. In any county. But I wouldn't -- I'd like to just say this about having the Seniors and Veterans, this is an honor to be on this Committee because I'll tell you something right now, we have 225,000 people over the age of 60 in this County. There's more veterans in this County than any county in the State of New York. There's more Viet Nam era veterans in this County, 44,000. I think it's a third in the County behind counties like Orange in California.

As many of you know, I'm also the President of a not-for-profit organization called Veterans Emergency Transportation. Now, over the -- since 2001, we have transported about 5,000 veterans and their spouses to medical appointments. What's unique about this transportation service, those of who you don't know, is that all the town transportation services take you within their town. So if you live in Islip and you have to go to Stony Brook or Smithtown, you have to go to a hospital outside your district, they won't take you. There's no VA or federal government agency that will take the spouses or widows of veterans except for us. We're the one in the nation that does so. There's no fee to the medical participants or the veteran.

Many of our clients are frail, elderly people because the transportation services in existence now, you have to be at the curb waiting for them. Northport VA system who has DVA vans only take you if you're at the curb an hour or two before waiting and if your appointment's in the morning. We take you for the afternoon appointments and we're the only agency that takes you to private doctors. Only 20% of the veterans in this County use Northport. So it could tell you how much driving we're doing. The only reason why we're limited to how many people we could take because we get calls many times to take people two and three times a week, we limit it to once a week because of funds. We have fundraisers and we raise our funds through that process and through grants.

As of today I'm going to -- I'd like to announce officially here I'm going to resign as President of the not-for-profit. Not that I think there's a conflict of interest because I draw no salary nor do any of my Board of Directors draw salaries. However, being that I am going to be the Director of the Veterans Service Agency, any County grants will come through Veterans, obviously. So it's best that I not be on the board effective today. I'll contact my attorney. And that will be done.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Any questions?

LEG. NOWICK:

Actually, not a question but I think that you're right. You are the perfect person for this job and there is no better.

MR. SMITH:

Thank you.

LEG. NOWICK:

Congratulations. Now, if you're retiring from the Veterans Emergency Board -- is that what you're doing?

MR. SMITH:

As President and CEO.

LEG. NOWICK:

Well, then who's going to run the --

MR. SMITH:

I don't know. But, you know, I was going to send a letter of -- to the Ethics Committee today when I was thinking about it to say -- let them make the decision. See, we draw no salaries. So I don't know what the conflict of interest is except that I was thinking about it; and the fact is that if a grant comes from one of the Legislators, I would have to sign it in the Veterans Service Agency and I just thought that it's best that I don't do it.

LEG. NOWICK:

But you do such a good job as a volunteer.

MR. SMITH:

Well, I'll still be -- I'll still be a consultant-type person. It's not -- I'm not going to drop it because no one can get 600 people on a Monday night to a dinner dance.

LEG. NOWICK:

That's right. So you really should see if you could work around that because I think the Veterans Emergency Transportation would be hurting without you.

MR. SMITH:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Bob, while I have you know here, I don't know if you could comment. There was a letter that was sent to the former Director of the Veterans Service Agency regarding a Mrs. Orlando, a daughter of a Ronald Orlando. Are you aware of the situation?

MR. SMITH:

No.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

We'll furnish you with a copy of this. And if you could get back to us on this situation, if there's anything -- Mea, do you have any more information on this?

MR. SMITH:

Was it a basic question that I might know or is it something I really need to read to get into it?

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Unfortunately, it just came before me so --

MR. SMITH:

Okay.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

We'll furnish you with a copy. It's fairly detailed.

MR. SMITH:

I'll get back to you.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Please, do. Thank you.

LEG. LINDSAY:

The letter, Bob, came to my office. It might have went to some other people on the Committee's office. I had forwarded it to Art for a comment. Art is no longer employed for the County?

MR. SMITH:

Right. What happened there was I had -- I would not fire another veteran for the sake of taking his position. What I did was, we offered him a job. I went back and I offered him a back position as a VSO and he declined. So that's how the situation occurred. Okay?

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

LEG. LINDSAY:

Could I just make one other comment? Veteran Transportation is a wonderful organization. They really do a great, great job. And Bob has been haunting me for a couple of years to attend their one fundraiser they have a year. It's in November on Veterans Day. And I went last year as well as Legislator Nowick was there. And it would be a challenge to the rest of the Committee this year that we attend in mass because it's a very worthwhile organization. And they do a wonderful job. And we had a good time.

MR. SMITH:

What makes it fun is, there's no proclamations given out, no testimonies. I mean, there was -- we did give a couple out this year only because some people stepped up to the plate and gave us some money. But normally it's just an evening of fundraising and fun. We usually have a singing group, we have a band, we have a four-course dinner. And then we keep the price only to \$80. I don't know of anybody who can get 600 people on a weekday night to attend. So if you can make it, it'll be great to have a table there.

LEG. CRECCA:

Mr. Chairman, I would just add that this year I couldn't go because we were out of state, but I've gone every year that they've had it and it's a great night, a lot of fun. And maybe next we can do a table of the Vets Committee.

LEG. NOWICK:

When is it next year?

MR. SMITH:

It's the day before Veterans Day. We figured that next day off was nice to have.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

I appreciate that.

MR. SMITH:

I think it may be November 11th, if you look at a calendar.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

And I appreciate Legislator Lindsay throwing the gauntlet down for us. It sounds like a very worthwhile event. And we'll certainly try to attend.

MR. SMITH:

Let me just say that this Committee and Legislator Lindsay has been very supportive of us. And we've been able to take people -- we don't ask them what district they live in. We don't worry about things like that. We don't ask them anything other than their need. And we also take people to -- which no other agency does -- we take the spouses to their veterans who are up in hospice, who are dying, and the wife is home and has no way to visit the husband in the hospital. We also pick them up and wait for them and take them home. And I think there's

brochures in all your offices. If not, just call my office and I'll send some to you for your constituents.

LEG. CRECCA:

Bob, is it the Monday night because the --

MR. SMITH:

No. I think it's a Wednesday night. No. When's Veterans Day this year?

LEG. CRECCA:

If it's on the 11th --

MR. SMITH:

It's a Wednesday night.

LEG. CRECCA:

Then it's the 10th. November 10th.

MR. SMITH:

Wednesday. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

Thank you. If there's no other business before us, we'll move on to our sole piece of legislation. **IR 1018-04 - Adopting Local Law No. 2004, a local law defining income for Senior Citizens Real Property Tax Exemption.**

LEG. ALDEN:

Motion to table for public hearing.

LEG. COOPER:

Second.

CHAIRMAN LOSQUADRO:

All in favor? Opposed? So tabled.

Thank you very much. Meeting is adjourned.

(THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 12:57 PM)